

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

Olive Milán, *Mosaic of the Creation*

PART 1 · CHAPTER 1

What is Public Theology?

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD

The late modern era of Western civilization has brought about a radical secularizing of the social order, unprecedented in world history. Observing this phenomenon during the mid-twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of a “world come of age” in which Westerners have discarded the idea of God and now manage their lives without any transcendent reference point.¹ Decades after Bonhoeffer, American sociologist Philip Rieff described it as one in which society has severed itself from sacred order, leaving itself without a transcendent matrix of meaning or a normative code for morality.² Still more recently, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor refers to the West as a society that lives entirely within the “immanent frame.”³

With the Judeo-Christian worldview thus displaced from the default position and Christianity perceived as just one “take” among many, an implausible one at that, everyday Christians have reached for biblical texts and themes to make sense of their lives in a secular public square. What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about gender and sexuality, politics and economics,

or art and entertainment? Likewise, Christian scholars have drawn upon Scripture and doctrine to reflect upon, interpret and critique public realities, and from this exercise has emerged the discipline now known as public theology.⁴

This is not to say that public theology is new. Throughout Scripture, we see the people of God engaging in public theology: think of Daniel’s interface with the Babylonian Empire or Esther’s with the Medes and Persians, Jesus’ life and teaching amid Jewish and Roman persecution, or Augustine’s book-length exposition of the Roman Empire in light of the biblical narrative.⁵ Yet, the contemporary academic discipline of public theology is new, emerging only recently from a millennia-long tradition of God’s people reflecting theologically upon matters of public import.

Although there is no consensual definition of public theology, it may be summarized as a discipline that arose in opposition to emergent secularism, on the

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter to Eberhard Bethge (June 8, 1944),” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 425–27.

2 Philip Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1–44.

3 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2007), 13–15; 542–557.

4 For a concise overview of public theology’s emergence in relation to its cousin disciplines, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., “State and Civil Society,” in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 423–38; for an extended exploration of the rise and development of public theology, see: Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

5 Augustine, *City of God*, abridged ed. (New York: Image, 1958).

one hand, and sectarian Christianity, on the other. Recognizing that Christianity can and should speak to public matters and that broad questions about public life cannot be fully addressed through any one discipline (e.g., theology, philosophy, ethics) or concerning any one sphere of culture (e.g., politics, science, art), it draws upon multiple theological disciplines to address a broad range of issues and questions from a Christian point of view. God is the Lord over every square inch of creation; thus, his self-revelation scales every height and plumbs every depth of the created order.

Public theology is undertaken from various denominational traditions, across a broad spectrum of approaches, and through diverse media. Yet despite its variation in theory and practice, certain familiar features can be identified from the best forms of public theology. Among these “family resemblances,” seven are especially noteworthy.

The Gospel as Public Truth

Public theology proceeds from the premise that the gospel is a public truth; thus, Christian engagement with the world must be total. Resisting the modern impulse to relegate faith to the private realm, it calls the Church to “enter vigorously into the struggle for truth in the public domain ... to publish it, to put it at risk in the encounter with other faiths and ideologies in open debate and argument, and in the risky business of discovering what Christian obedience means in radically new circumstances and radically human cultures.”⁶ Jesus

6 Leslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 59.



Christian Rohlfs, *Sermon on the Mount* (1916)

is Lord over all creation, and we are that part of creation whom he has equipped with the power to know and love the truth and speak his praise to all of creation. Thus, public theologians embrace the challenge of discerning God's design for each dimension of life, identifying how sin corrupted and misdirected it and suggesting how it can be redirected toward Christ.

A Public, rather than Merely Political, Purview

Public theology recognizes that the broad questions about public life cannot be adequately addressed by focusing exclusively on ethical, political or church-and-state topics. As a discipline, therefore, it differs from political theology, which tends to see government and politics as “the comprehending institution of society and the primary manifestation and guarantor of public justice,”⁷ by expanding its focus beyond politics to every sector of society and sphere of culture. God designed the world as a magnificent unity in diversity; our interface with public life must, therefore, address creation and culture in its totality.

The Bidirectionality of Exegesis

Public theology is a fundamentally exegetical discipline, with its exegetical focus directed in equal parts toward Scripture and culture. It seeks to hear the word of the Lord while listening attentively also to the world and its many voices. In other words, “the interpretive flow” in public theology runs from scriptural reflection to public application and from public realities toward Scripture and theology.⁸ Thus, public theology has an interdisciplinary nature and an impulse to pair biblical-theological studies with theoretical reflection on art, science, politics, education and more. It is precisely at the intersection of scriptural exegesis and cultural interpretation that public theology finds its traction.

The Necessity of Critique and Preference for Persuasion

Public theology presupposes that Christian faithfulness entails a willingness to speak the truth to power. Satan's antithetical agenda corrupts and misdirects God's good world in myriad ways, butting across every sector of society and sphere of culture – corrupting not only the religious sphere but also the artistic, educational and political spheres, among others. Thus, public theologians go beyond mere reflection on the principalities and

7 Max Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political theology and Public Theology: What's the Difference?” in *Political Theology* 5.3 (2004): 288, 289.

8 Matthew Kaemingk, “Introduction,” in Matthew Kaemingk, *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 4.

powers, publicly exposing and confronting them as well. Moreover, in tandem with prophetic critique, public theologians attempt to persuade various publics by setting theologically informed arguments attuned to a given society's contextual challenges and plausibility structures.

The Common Good of Christianity

Public theology is bound to the public good. Unlike dogmatics, which is concerned primarily with the city of God, public theology concerns itself with the common good of all humanity.

Whereas dogmatic theologians rightly focus on *koinonia*, a bond that can only be achieved when a people draw upon a shared love for God

to achieve a common goal, public theologians seek to foster a more limited *sunosia* (being-together); the church can achieve a common good that society cannot, but that does not mean that society cannot achieve a common good.⁹ Therefore, a hallmark of public theology is concern for the multivalent flourishing of society and its attendant cultural institutions.

A Reversal of the Direction of Conformity

Public theology rejects modern theology's capitulation to modernity through cultural accommodation. Seeking to reverse the direction of conformity, it re-describes reality within a biblical-theological framework rather than revisioning it to fit within modern plausibility structures.¹⁰ The point of its cultural exegesis is to lead society back to the biblical text rather than away from it. Although we live in a society in which Christian categories and language are gibberish at best and offensive at worst, public theologians are determined to speak their native (Christian) language and employ theological categories for the good of the world in a way that renders them plausible and even attractive to the world.

A Preference for Reformation over Revolution

Public theology seeks social and cultural renewal through reformation rather than revolution. Since the dawn of modernity, secular movements have wielded a false anthropology that blames institutions, rather than persons, for the origin of evil and subsequently called

9 Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1977), 55.

10 Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "What New Haven and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other" in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986-1998*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 256.

for revolutionary measures that purportedly will help humanity take a great leap forward morally. Certain Christian movements, such as Liberation Theology, likewise propose revolutionary measures. Public theologians, however, recognize a quintessential feature of God's interaction with creation, which is his preference for reform over revolution; he works with what he had already made rather than clearing the decks and starting over. In conformity with God's preference, public theologians work with what is given, seeking to bend it toward God's design for human flourishing. A public

theologian's posture is reformatinal.

Conclusion

In John's Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples with the

simple impartation, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Perhaps this brief utterance is the best encapsulation of public theology's *telos*. Public theology is at its best when it seeks the peace of the city by following Jesus' pattern of public interface. Our work will be *prophetic*, declaring that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, challenging the *cultus publicus* of our society; *sacrificial* in its willingness to serve predominantly secular societies from a position of weakness rather than power, and in the face of disapproval instead of applause; *humbly confident*, knowing that the realm of politics will one day be raised to life, made to bow to the King. Since Jesus will gain victory and restore the earth, we remain confident. And since it will be his victory, we remain humble.

Bruce Riley Ashford is a Senior Fellow in Public Theology at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.



Birger Carlstedt, *La Création du Monde*